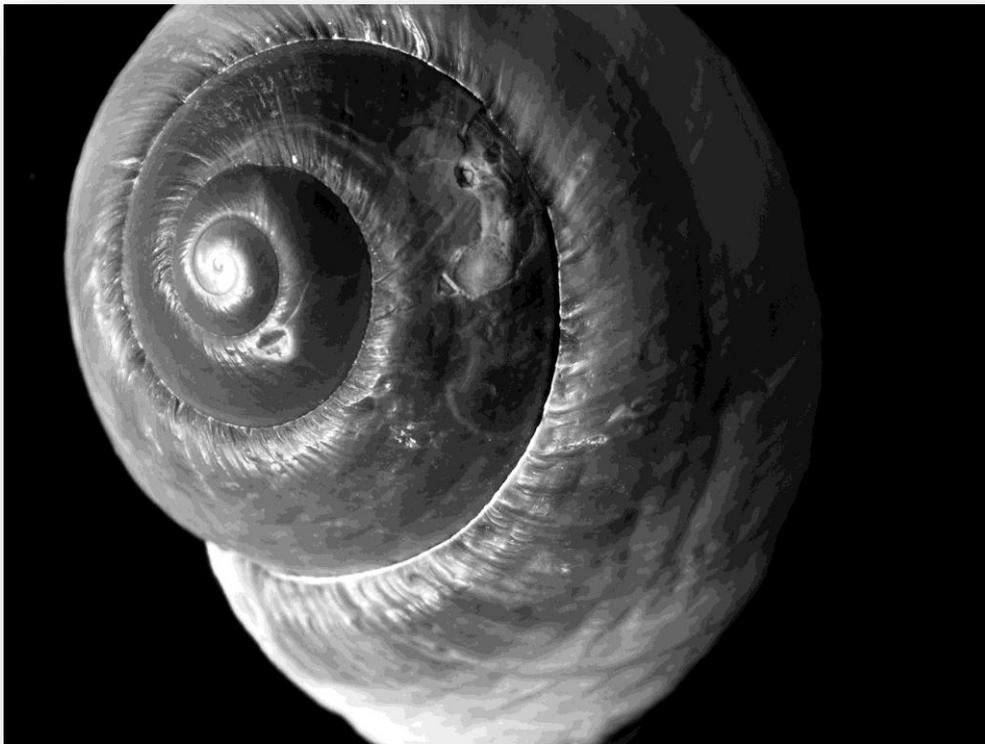


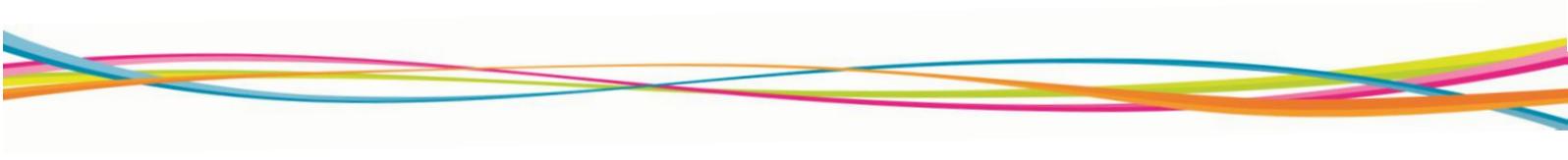
The importance of creativity for health and wellbeing

Evidence base for Start

Compiled by Wendy Teall and Tamzin Forster



All photos reproduced by kind permission of Jamie Todd and Glyn Thomason



Start

Start is an arts-based mental health service, established in 1986 and is part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust. The service works with people who are experiencing severe and enduring mental ill-health. Start helps its students (patients /service users attending the service) to rediscover or learn new skills, rebuild identity and confidence, acquire effective recovery strategies, and move forward into futures that have more choice and more quality of life.

Our team of artists works with an Occupational Therapist to deliver a structured, evidence-based and personalised programme of wellbeing arts activities to our students. The specific methods of the Start model enable students attending the service to experience the powerful therapeutic benefits art can bring to mental health and wellbeing. We would describe such benefits as intrinsic (art enjoyed for its own sake) and instrumental (the skills, outlooks, knowledge, insights and potentials stimulated by focused experiences in creative wellbeing arts).

Below is an overview of the evidence base for our model of working.

The importance of creativity for health and wellbeing

What is creativity? It's a set of skills, an attitude to life, the ability to have original, meaningful ideas that often cross over disciplines and connect previously separate information. It's a vital ingredient of being human, leading to growth, change and progress at individual and societal level.

It isn't surprising then that there's increasing evidence for the importance of nourishing our natural creativity, so that it can help build and protect wellbeing and speed up recovery from illness.

How would creativity achieve this?

When we think about keeping ourselves well, there are many skills involved in this. Here are just some:

- . Feeling able to cope with stress
- . Finding creative solutions to problems
- . Finding ways to be mindful, to relax and enjoy the moment
- . Feeling confident and trusting in ourselves
- . Finding meaning in the world around us
- . Knowing who we are
- . Having hopes and goals in life, feeling useful

Developing our creative potential can support all these skill areas. Below we'll look at some evidence for the contribution that creativity can make to each.

Like all skills, creativity needs nourishing and exercising. The creative muscle is no different to our other muscles, and will respond well to specifically designed, strengthening creative exercises. At Start, we have studied the impacts of creative activity carefully and have developed courses that target wellbeing and self-care skills. Our courses and programmes are complex individualised interventions for mental health, working at a number of levels to develop skills and outlooks in each person.



Feeling able to cope with stress, and finding creative solutions to problems

Creative activities such as art, with its many challenges to the self and the world around us, can stimulate problem-solving and coping skills. The main reason for this seems to be the mental agility that arts activities build in the participant. Some studies suggest that art is an activity that uses the whole brain, that is stimulating both the left, logical side, and the right, emotional side. This builds connections across the brain at a physical level, and new habits of thinking at a mental level. Like any well-exercised muscle, our brains become more flexible, and in turn this has been shown to lead to better problem solving skills at a practical level in life^{1,2}. Modern research around neuroplasticity of the brain certainly accords with this. Our brains can remap their neural pathways as a result of experience and so take on learning, and create new memories.

Another study³ shows that participating in arts activities helps us to face and tackle problems because it routinely provides practice in ‘confronting difficulties and meeting challenges...[The experiences of] coping with such effects are beneficial in building long term sustainable versions of recovery and resilience.’

Matarrasso⁴ develops this theme in his study on the impacts of art, saying: ‘The greatest social impacts of participation in the arts – and the ones that other programmes cannot achieve – arise from their ability to help people think critically about and question their experiences and those of others, not in a discussion group, but with all the excitement, danger, magic, colour, symbolism, feeling, metaphor and creativity that the arts offer.’

In clinical circles, this view gains support too. A national research study⁵ revealed significant evidence that art can be used by arts group participants ‘as a multi-purpose ‘tool’, which they could deploy in different circumstances to alleviate mental distress and cope better with mental health difficulties...’.

Occupational Therapist Jennifer Creek explored this idea in her study⁶ of creative activity groups for women from deprived neighbourhoods. She demonstrated that creative activity can tap into ‘the creative potential’ and stimulate flexible thinking. This thinking had, in turn, a direct benefit for life skills, such as problem solving and coping with challenges: ‘The capacity for thinking and acting creatively will influence the way in which problems are approached and enhance the ability to find solutions... This flexibility, which is characteristic of creative thinking, enhances the individual’s ability to cope adaptively with the inevitable stresses of life.’

Similarly, White⁷ describes art as providing ‘a medium for participants to explore and understand feelings and develop alternative coping strategies’. Art, he wrote, ‘is a tool for change’. The capacity for adaptation, he suggests, is closely linked to maintenance of good health. He quotes Illich, for example: ‘Health designates a process of adaptation. It designates the ability to adapt to changing environments, to growing up and ageing, to healing when damaged... health embraces the future as well and therefore includes anguish and the inner resources to deal with it.’

He also cites Smith’s assertion in the British Medical Journal: ‘More and more of life’s... difficulties... are being medicalised. Medicine cannot solve these problems... If health is about adaptation, understanding and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything else medicine has to offer.’⁸

White goes on to link these quotes to a wide variety of arts services that work with people with mental health challenges. He shows evidence from these services demonstrating that participants experience enhancement of important life skills such as emotional literacy, communication, health management, skills and confidence, social connectedness and stress management.

So participation in arts activities can lead to gains in adaptive coping strategies and life skills, because the activities themselves stimulate new neural pathways in the brain, leading to new skills and habits of thinking, and therefore new ways of approaching life situations.

Finding ways to be mindful, to relax and enjoy the moment

Some well-known research called 'The Relaxation Response' has shown⁹ that contact with visual art releases feel-good chemicals, such as endorphins, into the brain. These chemicals help with stress and pain relief, positive mood, relaxation and concentration. Not surprisingly then, engaging in arts and cultural activities has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety and increase feelings of wellbeing in people affected by mental health issues^{10,11}. This can translate into tangible reductions in costs of medication, care and even hospital readmission. Everitt and Hamilton (2003) showed that some GP surgeries running arts for health projects saw, in those participant patients, a reduction in visits from women with depression and a reduction in medication¹². At Start, Colgan¹³ demonstrated that there were fewer readmissions to psychiatric hospital when discharged patients were involved in arts projects in the community with artists.

Interestingly, you don't even have to get 'hands-on' to benefit. Looking at art can be just as positive. For instance an Italian study showed that viewing a beautiful work of art can help with pain management¹⁴. Another study shows improvements to blood pressure and vital signs, stress and anxiety, when art and music are used in hospital environments¹⁵. The links between cultural attendance and health have also been demonstrated in studies in Sweden (Bygren, 2009)¹⁶, Norway (Cuypers, 2011)¹⁷ and Finland (Hyyppa 2006)¹⁸ and DCMS CASE programme (2013)¹⁹.

Taking part in arts activities can produce meditative 'flow' experiences too²⁰, these being beneficial to mental and physical health. We experience 'flow'²¹ when we are engaged in activities that are challenging but for which we have the skills to meet the challenge. 'Flow' experiences engage our whole selves. There is a suspension in perception of the passage of time, a cessation of ruminative thought (a quieting of the mind), an alert concentration of mind and body; research indicates that this leads to increased feelings of usefulness, of self esteem and self value. All these are, of course, good for our sense of wellbeing.

'Flow' experiences are strongly associated with mindfulness, the practice of bringing awareness to the present moment with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgment. Mindfulness cultivates an ability to both experience, and to witness or observe the experience. Arts practice is a fascinating way to work with mindfulness, offering the possibility both of the 'flow' experience, and the opportunity to step back at various points in the artistic making process, to observe and assess both product and process²². At Start we are beginning to create a combination of arts and mindfulness approaches in some of our courses, consciously developing a melded practice that we call 'Attentive Creative Practice'. The feedback from participants has been positive, with reductions in anxiety and depression and heightened senses of insight and awareness of the present.

Parr²³, in her study on art and mental wellbeing, is interested in this type of benefit. She reports that people engaging in arts activities often refer to the energising and restorative aspects of art as a process of inner healing. She terms the experience of art as a 'therapeutic interiority... a psychological locatedness, enabling a temporarily all-consuming occupational space that distract[s] from negative and disruptive thoughts and emotions.'



Confidence and meaning

Helping us to think about and understand ourselves and the world around us is another valuable benefit that contact with art can bring.

Whether viewing or making art, we can use it to explore our opinions, ponder our feelings, investigate our likes or dislikes, and consider our cultural identity and values. This can help us express ourselves more clearly, and understand the way we view the world around us²⁴. In Matarasso's study, 'Use or Ornament?'²⁵ he suggests that art has a unique ability to help us find meaning in the world and, in turn, he suggests that art interprets the world back to us. It is this capacity for art to embody meaning and value that makes it so powerful in rebuilding lives. 'Art as activity, process and object, is central to how people experience, understand and then shape the world'.

Kerka²⁶ too is interested in what art can offer us. In her research she explores ways that creative activities stimulate much within us – the senses, the intuition, critical thinking and expressive self-development. She posits that the arts are uniquely well-placed to help us interpret and reinterpret the world and adapt to its ever-changing circumstances by adjusting our perceptions.

Lastly, participating in the arts can give us some ability to practice risk-taking, which is a vital aspect of developing our confidence, trust, and ability to react positively and adaptively to new circumstances. Matarasso²⁷ writes about this, referring to how participatory arts activities can benefit us by 'teaching us how to live with risk and to turn it to our advantage.'

Having hopes and goals in life, feeling useful

Having hopes and goals and feelings of usefulness are closely associated with the development of confidence, for without confidence, we are unlikely to feel hopeful about the future, or useful in the present. Participation in a drawing and painting course was shown to directly benefit confidence and motivation in over 80% of participants in a study by Margrove in 2012, so it's clear that art has a strong role to play here²⁸.

This may be in part because well-thought through creative activities can provide wonderfully rich environments for achievement. The benefits of having a real sense of achievement can't be overstated. Achievement builds confidence and motivation, which in turn spurs us on to take further positive risks and thereby take on fresh challenges and achieve a little more. This is known as a positive spiral. Some researchers point to a symbiotic relationship between self-esteem and achievement: raising self-esteem tends to make achievements more likely, partly because it raises self-expectation and so builds motivation^{29, 30, 31}.

Creative activities challenge us to learn new things, providing exercise for the mind and body and widening our horizons. As we negotiate these new creative challenges and master fresh creative skills, so we build self-esteem and confidence. The positive spiral is established.

Creek's study³² cited above shows evidence for this. She reported some improvements in art group participants' mood, motivation and self-esteem. She reflected that this may be connected with both increases in flexible thinking skills, and to a process of redefinition of the self stimulated by a sense of achievement.



Knowing who we are

Connected to interpreting the world around us and building confidence in ourselves, is the effect of redefining ourselves in relation to the world. Here again there is evidence that participation in the arts can help. Parr ³³ calls this effect of art 'relational social practice'. Participation in the arts, and making art, has a social dimension, she argues, that is quite distinctive. Parr notes that participants in arts projects can derive a sense of social locatedness from their achievements. By this, she means the regaining of a sense of one's abilities and place within the 'social mainstream', and the use of this experience as a 'stepping stone for reinsertion into wider social relationships and situations'.

Matarasso too pulls together evidence that participative arts can build identity and social relatedness. He concludes that participative arts can enable people to 'take an active part in their own development and in the lives of their communities'³⁴. This accords with more recent reporting of findings in the 2014 Wellbeing Economics report 'Wellbeing in four policy areas'³⁵.

What other benefits arise from participation in creative activity?

Studies show a wide range of specific benefits at an individual level, deriving from participating in the arts. These vary from evidence that doodling improves concentration³⁶, to evidence that embroidery trains the brain to think in creative, logical patterns³⁷. Several sources now show that engagement with the arts is linked to better physical and mental health^{38, 39, 40} and a 2013 evidence review demonstrated 'some support for the physical and psychological benefits of using arts with people using social care services. When delivered effectively, interventions were able to facilitate social interaction as well as enabling participants to pursue creative interests'. This report goes on to cite positive effects on loneliness, depression and anxiety for people in social care environments, when participating in effectively delivered arts programmes⁴¹. Recent research commissioned by the DCMS found that even audience members at arts events were more likely to report good health than those people who didn't engage with the arts at all (this research controlled for factors like income)⁴². At a societal level, engagement with the arts also has its impacts. Research suggests a link between community cohesion and the arts⁴³. In addition, there is evidence that arts activities can help combat loneliness and social isolation among older people⁴⁴.

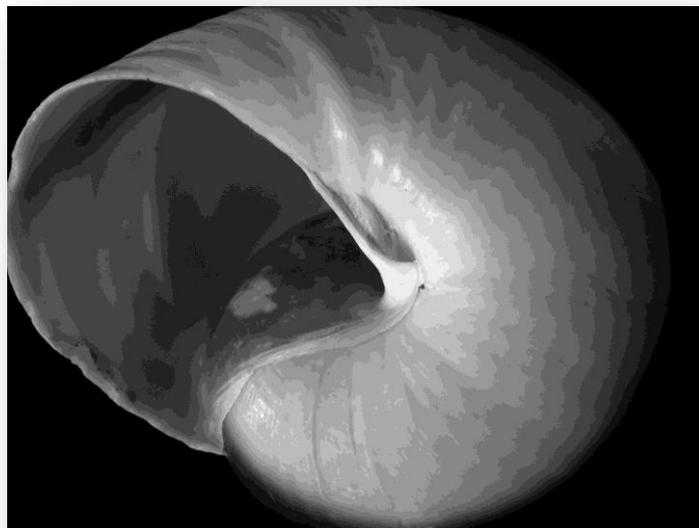
But we would be falling short of the value of the arts if we only regard them as of instrumental value. The arts also give us pure pleasure, new perspectives, stimulation and experiences of connection. As the report 'Wellbeing in four policy areas' states: 'Ultimately...there is something distinctive and intrinsically valuable in the experience of art works...As the Arts Council's website puts it: 'when we talk about the value of arts and culture to society, we always start with its intrinsic value: how arts and culture can illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world'⁴⁵.



Conclusion

The Mental Health Commission produced its final report on the state of wellbeing in England, which it titled 'The Pursuit of Happiness'⁴⁶. This report concludes that there is a pressing need to rebuild attention to the whole person in healthcare, that pressures on mental health services are mounting exponentially, and that a wider approach to treatment needs to be taken. Amongst its important recommendations is that emotional resilience techniques such as mindfulness should be included in the National Curriculum, and that GP social prescribing (such as Arts on Prescription) should be available in every primary care practice. Certainly studies into Arts on Prescription schemes and mindfulness courses would support this conclusion, given that they show improvements in wellbeing and reductions in stress, depression and anxiety.

In a nutshell, ways to promote health intelligence and self-care are increasingly going to be the way forward for our over-burdened health care systems. That the arts are both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable to us as humans means they could and should have a powerful role to play in the health arena in the future.



Sources

1. Edwards B. (1993) *Drawing on the Right Hand Side of the Brain*. Souvenir Press
2. Creek J. *Measuring the outcomes of a creative activity group*. *Mental Health Occupational Therapy* 2001; 6, 2: 18 : 20.
3. Parr H. *The arts and mental health: creativity and inclusion*. Dundee: University of Dundee/Economic and Social Research Council, 2005.
4. Matarasso, F. 1997 *Use or Ornament? the social impact of participation in the arts*. Comedia Conference
5. Secker, J. et al (2007) *Mental health, social inclusion and the arts: developing an evidence base*. Anglia Ruskin/UCLan/ DoH
6. Creek, J. op cit
7. White M. *Addressing the evidence base from participation in arts and cultural activities: a report to the Social Exclusion Unit*. Durham: University of Durham, 2003.
8. 8. Smith, R. *Editorial*. *British Medical Journal* 2002:325 December
9. Benson, H. and Klipper, M. Z. (2000) *The Relaxation Response*. HarperCollins, U.S.A.
10. Huxley P.J. (1997) *Arts on Prescription*. Stockport NHS Trust
11. Kilroy, A. et al (2008) *Invest to Save*. Miriad publications at www.miriad.mmu.ac.uk/investtosave
12. Everitt A. and Hamilton R. (2003) *Art, Health and Well-being – An Evaluation of Five Community Arts in Health Projects*. CAHHM Durham
13. Colgan, S., Bridges K., Brown L., et al (1991) *A Tentative Start to Community Care*. *Psychiatric Bulletin*
14. Alleyne, R. *Looking at beautiful art can act as a painkiller*. *The Telegraph* 17.9.08
15. RSPH Working Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. (2013). *Arts, Health and Wellbeing Beyond the Millennium: How far have we come and where do we want to go?* London: Royal Society for Public Health.
16. Bygren, L O, Weissglas, G, Wikstrom, B-M, Benson Konlaan, B, Grijbovski, A, Karlsson, A-B and Andersson, S-O (2009) *Cultural participaton and health: a randomized control trial among medical care staff*. *Psychosomatic Medicine*71 (4), 469-473
17. Cuypers, K, Krokstad, S, Holmen, TL, Knudsten, M S, Bygren, L O and Holman, J. (2011) *Patterns of receptive and creative cultural activities and their association with perceived health, anxiety, depression and satisfaction with life among adults: the HUNT study*. Norway, *Journal of Epidemiol Community Health*
18. Hyyppa, MT, Maki, J, Impivaara, O, and Aromaa, A, (2006) *Leisure participation predicts survival: a population based study in Finland*. *Health Promotion International* 21(1), 5-12
19. Culture and Sport Evidence Programme (CASE) (2010) *Understanding the value of engagement in culture and sport*, Department for Culture, Media and Sport
20. Story, R (1998) *The Wise and The Foolish The Paradoxical World of Mental Health*
21. Csikszentmihalyi, M (1975) *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
22. Rappaport, L. et al (2013) *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies: Theory and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
23. Parr, H. op cit
24. Parr, H. op cit
25. Matarasso, F. op cit
26. Kerka S. *Arts and humanities in adult and continuing education: trends and issues alert*. ERIC /ACVE Publications. www.ericacve.org
27. Matarasso, F. op cit

28. Margrove K., SE-SURG, Heydinrych K. and Secker J. (2012) *Waiting list controlled evaluation of a participatory arts course for people experiencing mental health problems*. Perspectives in Public Health. (Online First) October 3, doi:10.1177/1757913912461587 source: <http://rsh.sagepub.com/content/early/recent>
29. Holly, W. 1987 *Self-esteem: does it contribute to students' academic success?* Eugene, OR: Oregon School Study Council, University of Oregon.
30. Scheirer, M. and Krant, R. 1979 *Increasing educational achievement via self-concept change*. Review of Educational Research, 49, 131-150
31. Wylie, R. C. 1974 *The Self Concept*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press
32. Creek, J. op cit
33. Parr, H. op cit
34. Matarasso, op cit
35. All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics (2014) *Wellbeing in four policy areas*.
36. Andrade, J. (2009) Webpage. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2009/feb/27/doodling-doodles-boring-meetings-concentration-> A study on the value of doodling by Jackie Andrade, cognitive psychologist at the University of Plymouth
37. Alvarenga, M. (2009) Webpage. Retrieved from <http://www.news.com.au/news/stitch-your-way-to-happiness/story-fn6ja1a0-1226347095890> - Dr Marlies Alvarenga, director of the Monash Clinical Psychology Centre at Monash University speaks about the impacts of embroidery on stress, and brain function
38. RSPH Working Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. (2013). (op cit)
39. Mowlah, A. et al. (2014). *The value of arts and culture to people and society: An evidence review*. Manchester: Arts Council England. For an overview see Arts for Health at Manchester Metropolitan University. The long-term benefits of participation in the arts: An international evidence base. Webpage. Retrieved from <http://longitudinalhealthbenefits.wordpress.com>
40. Consilium (2013) *What do we know about the role of arts in the delivery of social care?* Skills for Care.
41. Fujiwara, D. et al. (2014b). *Quantifying the social impacts of culture and sport*. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
42. Matrix Knowledge Group. (2010). *Understanding the value of engagement with culture and sport*. London: Culture and Sport Evidence Programme.
43. Cohen, G.D. et al. (2006). *The impact of professional conducted programs on the physical health, mental health and social functioning of older adults*. The Gerontologist, 46(6),726–734.
44. All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics, op cit
45. All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics, op cit
46. Mental Health Commission (2014) *The Pursuit of Happiness: a new ambition for our mental health*. A Centreforum Commission